

Source #1: An Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico (1528)

Miguel Leon Portilla, a Mexican anthropologist, gathered accounts by the Aztecs during the 1930s and 1940s, some of which were written shortly after the conquest. The following excerpts are taken from the book **The Broken Spears**. This book is based on written accounts from Aztec native priests and wise men who managed to survive the destruction of the Aztec Empire. These accounts date back to 1528, seven years after the fall of the capital city Tenochtitlan.

Speeches of Montezuma and Cortés

When Montezuma had given necklaces to each one, Cortés asked him: *Are you Montezuma? Are you the king? Is it true that you are the king Montezuma?*

And the king said: *Yes, I am Motecuhzoma*. Then he stood up to welcome Cortés; he came forward, bowed his head low and addressed him in these words:

Our lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on the earth. You have come to your city, Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy. The kings who have gone before, your representatives, guarded it and preserved it for your coming. The kings Itzcoatl, Montezuma the Elder, Axayacatl, Tizoc and Ahuitzol ruled for you in the City of Mexico. The people were protected by their swords and sheltered by their shields.

Do the kings know the destiny of those they left behind, their posterity? If only they are watching! If only they can see what I see! No, it is not a dream. I am not walking in my sleep. I am not seeing you in my dreams.... I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face! I was in agony for five days, for ten days, with my eyes fixed on the Region of the Mystery. And now you have come out of the clouds and mists to sit on your throne again.

This was foretold by the kings who governed your city, and now it has taken place. You have come back to us; you have come down from the sky. Rest now, and take possession of your royal houses. Welcome to your land, my lords!

When Montezuma had finished, La Malinche translated his address into Spanish so that the Captain could understand it. Cortés replied in his strange and savage tongue, speaking first to La Malinche:

Tell Montezuma that we are his friends. There is nothing to fear. We have wanted to see him for a long time, and now we have seen his face and heard his words. Tell him that we love him well and that our hearts are contented.

Then he said to Montezuma: *We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear.*

La Malinche translated this speech and the Spaniards grasped Montezuma hands and patted his back to show their affection for him....

Source #2: Cortés on Meeting Moctezuma (1520)

There came to meet me at this place [on a causeway] nearly a thousand of the principal inhabitants of the great city, all uniformly dressed according to their custom in very rich costumes; and as soon as they had come within speaking distance, each one, as he approached me, performed a salutation in much use among them, by placing his hand upon the ground and kissing it; and thus I was kept waiting about an hour, until all had performed the ceremony.

Moctezuma came through the center of the street, attended by two lords, one upon his right, and the other upon his left hand, one of whom was the same nobleman who, as I have mentioned, came to meet me in a litter; and the other was the brother of Moctezuma, lord of the city of Iztapalapa, which I had left the same day; all three were dressed in the same manner, except that Moctezuma wore shoes, while the others were without them. He was supported on the arms of both, and as we approached, I alighted and advanced alone to salute him; but the two attendant lords stopped me to prevent my touching him, and they and he both performed the ceremony of kissing the ground; after which he directed his brother who accompanied him to remain with me; the latter accordingly took me by the arm,

while Moctezuma, with his other attendant, walked a short distance in front of me, and after he had spoken to me, all the other nobles also came up to address me, and then went away in two processions with great regularity, one after the other, and in this manner returned to the city.

At the time I advanced to speak to Moctezuma, I took off from myself a collar of pearls and glass diamonds, and put it around his neck. After having proceeded along the street, one of his servants came bringing two collars formed of shell fish, enclosed in a roll of cloth, which were made from the shells of colored prawns or periwinkles, held by them in high estimation; and from each collar depended eight golden prawns, finished in a very perfect manner, about a foot and a half in length. When these were brought, Moctezuma turned, towards me and put them round my neck...

"It is now a long time since, by means of written records, we learned from our ancestors that neither myself nor any of those who inhabit this region were descended from its original inhabitants, but from strangers who emigrated hither from a very distant land; and we have also learned that a prince, whose vassals they all were, conducted our people into these parts, and then returned to his native land. He afterwards came again to this country, after the lapse of much time, and found that his people had intermarried with the native inhabitants, by whom they had many children, and had built towns in which they resided; and when he desired them to return with him, they were unwilling to go, nor were they disposed to acknowledge him as their sovereign; so he departed from the country, and we have always heard that his descendants would come to conquer this land, and reduce us to subjection as his vassals; and according to the direction from which you say you have come, namely, the quarter where the sun rises, and from what you say of the great lord or king, who sent you hither, we believe and are assured that he is our natural sovereign, especially as you say that it is a long time since you first had knowledge of us."

"Therefore be assured that we will obey you, and acknowledge you, for our sovereign in place of the great lord whom, you mention, and that there shall be no default or deception on our part. And you have the power in all this land, I mean wherever my power extends, to command what is your pleasure, and it shall be done in obedience thereto, and all that we have is at your disposal. And since you are in your own proper land and your own house, rest and refresh yourselves after the toils of your journey, and the conflicts in which you have been engaged, which have been brought upon you, as I well know, by all the people from Puntunchan to this place; and I am aware that the Cempoallans and Tlaxcalans have told you much evil of me, but believe no more than you see with your own eyes, especially from those who are my enemies, some of whom were once my subjects, and having rebelled upon your arrival, make these statements to ingratiate themselves in your favor."

"You see that I am composed of flesh and bone like yourselves, and I am mortal, and palpable to the touch," at the same time pinching his arms and body with his hands; "see," he continued, "how they have deceived you. It is true I have some things of gold, which my ancestors have left me; all that I have is at your service whenever you wish it. I am now going to my other houses where I reside; you will be here provided with every thing necessary for yourself and your people, and will suffer no embarrassment, as you are in your own house and country."

I answered him in respect to all that he had said, expressing my acknowledgments, and adding whatever the occasion seemed to demand, especially endeavoring to confirm him in the belief that your Majesty was the sovereign they had looked for; and after this he took his leave, and having gone, we were liberally supplied with fowls, bread, fruits, and other things required for the use of our quarters. In this way I was for six days amply provided with all that was necessary, and visited by many of the nobility.

Source #3: Mexica Accounts of Moctezuma Meeting Cortés

From Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex*, Book 12, Chapter Sixteen (1590)

Here it is recalled how Moctezuma went in peace and calm to meet the Spaniards at Xoloco, where the house of Alvarado now stands, or at the place they call Huitzillan.

And when the Spaniards had arrived at Xoloco, Moctezuma dressed and prepared himself to meet them with other great rulers and princes, his major men and nobles. They then went to meet him [Cortés]. They arranged beautiful flowers in gourds used for vases, in the midst of sunflowers and magnolias, they placed popcorn flowers, yellow magnolias, and cacao blooms, and they made these into wreaths for the head and for garlands. And they wore golden necklaces, necklaces with pendants, and necklaces with [precious] stones.

And when Moctezuma went to meet them at Huitzillan, he bestowed gifts on Cortés; he gave him flowers, he put necklaces on him; he hung garlands around him and put wreaths on his head. Then he laid out before him, the golden necklaces, all of his gifts [for the Spaniards]. He ended by putting some of the necklaces on him.

Then Cortés asked him: *"Is it not you? Are you not he? Are you Moctezuma?"*

And Moctezuma responded: *"Yes, I am Moctezuma."* Then he stood up to welcome Cortés, to meet him face to face. He bowed his head low, stretched as far as he could, and stood firm.

Then he addressed him in these words: *"Our lord, you are very welcome in your arrival in this land. You have come to satisfy your curiosity about your noble city of Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy, which I have kept for awhile for you. For the rulers and governors [of past times] have gone: Itzcoatl, Moctezuma I, Axayacatl, Tlācōcic, and Ahuitzotl. [Since they are gone], your poor vassal has been in charge for you, to govern the city of Mexico. Will they come back to the the place of their absence? If even one came, he might witness the marvel that has taken place in my time, see what I am seeing, as the only descendent of our lords. For I am not just dreaming, not just sleepwalking, not seeing you in my dreams. I am not just dreaming that I have seen you and have looked at you face to face. I have been worried for a long time, looking toward the unknown from which you have come, the mysterious place. For our rulers departed, saying that you would come to your city and sit upon your throne. And now it has been fulfilled, you have returned. Go enjoy your palace, rest your body. Welcome our lords to this land."*

When Moctezuma finished his speech, which he directed toward the Marquis, Marina explained and interpreted it for him. And when the Marquis heard what Moctezuma had said, he spoke to Marina in a babbling tongue: *"Tell Moctezuma to not be afraid, for we greatly esteem him. Now we are satisfied because we have seen him in person and heard his voice. For until now, we have wanted to see him face to face. And now we have seen him, we have come to his home in Mexico, slowly he will hear our words."*

Thereupon, Cortés took Moctezuma by the hand and led him by it. They walked with him, stroking his hair, showing their esteem. And the Spaniards looked at him, each examining him closely. They walked on foot, then mounted and dismounted in order to look at him.

Source #4: Cortés Destroys the Idols and Instructs the Aztec in the Christian Religion

From Cortés, *Second Letter*(1520), pp. 114-118

In these chapels stood the images or idols (statues), although, as I have before said, many of them are also found on the outside; the principal ones, in which the people have greatest faith and confidence, I ... cast down the steps of the temple, purifying the chapels in which they had stood, as they were all polluted with human blood, shed in the sacrifices.

In the place of these I put images of Our Lady and the Saints, which excited not a little feeling in Moctezuma and the inhabitants, who at first protested, declaring that if my proceedings were known throughout the country, the people would rise against me; for they believed that their gods bestowed all earthly good and if they permitted them to be ill-treated, they would be angry and withhold their gifts, and by this means the people would be deprived of the fruits of the earth and perish with famine.

I answered, through the interpreters, that they were deceived in expecting any favors from idols, the work of their own hands, formed of unclean things; and that they must learn there was but one God, the universal Lord of all, who had created the heavens and the earth, and all things else, and had made them and us; that he was without beginning and immortal, and they were bound to adore and believe him, and no other creature or thing. I said everything to divert them I could to divert them from their idolatries (worship), and draw them to a knowledge of God our Lord.

Afterwards, Moctezuma and many of the principal citizens remained with me until I had removed the idols, purified the chapels, and placed the images in them, showing apparent pleasure; and I forbade them sacrificing human beings to their idols, as they had been accustomed to do; because, besides being wrong

in the sight of God, your sacred Majesty had prohibited it by law, and commanded to put to death whoever should take the life of another. Thus, from that time they stopped making sacrifices, and during the whole period of my stay in that city, they were never seen to, kill or sacrifice a human being.

Source #5: *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*

by Miguel Leon-Portilla

Miguel Leon Portilla, a Mexican anthropologist, gathered accounts by the Aztecs during the 1930s and 1940s, some of which were written shortly after the conquest. The following excerpts are taken from the book ***The Broken Spears***. This book is based on written accounts from Aztec native priests and wise men who managed to survive the destruction of the Aztec Empire. These accounts date back to 1528, seven years after the fall of the capital city Tenochtitlan.

The Arrival at the City (Tezcoco)

At the request of Ixtlilxochitl (ruler of the city Tezcoco), Cortes and his men ate the gifts of food... and walked to the city with their new friends, and all the people came out to cheer and welcome them. The Indians knelt down and adored them as sons of the sun, their gods, believing that the time had come of which their dear king Nezahualpilli had so often spoken. The Spaniards entered the city and were lodged in the royal palace.

Word of these events was brought to the king, Motecuhzoma, who was pleased by the reception his nephews had given Cortez. Cortes was very grateful for the attentions shown him by Ixtlilxochitl and his brothers and wished to repay the kindness by teaching them the law of God, with the help of his interpreter Aguilar.

The brothers and a number of other lords gathered to hear him, and he told them that the emperor of the Christians had sent him here, so far away, in order that he might instruct them in the law of Christ. He explained the mystery of the Creation and the Fall, the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and the mystery of the Passion and the Resurrection. Then he drew out a crucifix and held it up. The Christians all knelt, and Ixtlilxochitl and the other lords knelt with them.

Cortes also explained the mystery of Baptism. He concluded the lesson by telling them how the Emperor Charles (of Spain) grieved that they were not in God's grace, and how the emperor had sent him among them only to save their souls.

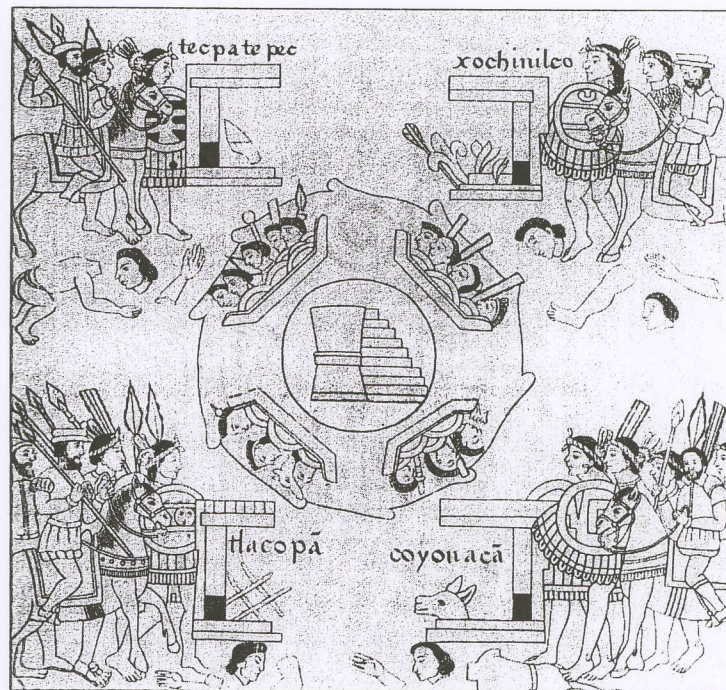
Ixtlilxochitl Becomes a Christian

When Cortes asked for their reply, Ixtlilxochitl burst into tears and answered that he and his brothers understood the mysteries very well. Giving thanks to God that his soul had been illumined (enlightened), he said that he wished to become a Christian and to serve the emperor. He begged for the crucifix, so that he and his brothers might worship it, and the Spaniards wept with joy to see their devotion.

Source #6: The Siege of Tenochtitlan (1521)

The Siege of Tenochtitlan, 1521

At the centre of this design is Tenochtitlan, the island capital of the Aztecs. It is represented by its huge main pyramid, which stood on the site now occupied by the Cathedral of Mexico City. Around it on Lake Texcoco, Aztec warriors in canoes hold shields, clubs and spears and swords inset with obsidian; one of them (lower left) is distinguished by the Jaguar uniform of the military elite. At the corners are four towns, shown by a large House sign; in each of them mounted Spaniards, together with native allies, trample on the dismembered bodies of vanquished local inhabitants (the arrow sticking in Xochinilco, upper right, means 'conquest'). . . . After fiercely resisting Cortés when he entered their territory (roughly the modern state of Tlaxcala) on his march from the Gulf Coast, the Tlaxcalans joined him in the Spanish attack on their old enemies the Aztecs and became his stoutest allies. The siege of Tenochtitlan is one of several major campaigns depicted in their Lienzo, which the Tlaxcalans painted c. 1550 to celebrate their prowess and to remind the Spaniards of their indebtedness to them.



From *Image of the New World: The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts*. Gordon Brotherston, ed. London: Thames and Hudson, 1979.

Source #7: The Festival of Tóxcatl: War Breaks Out Between Spaniards and Méxicas

From Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex*, Book 12, Chapter 20 (1590)

Here it is told how the Spaniards killed, they murdered the Méxicas who were celebrating the Fiesta of Huitzilopochtli in the place they called The Patio of the Gods

At this time, when everyone was enjoying the fiesta, when everyone was already dancing, when everyone was already singing, when song was linked to song and the songs roared like waves, in that precise moment the Spaniards determined to kill people. They came into the patio, armed for battle.

They came to close the exits, the steps, the entrances [to the patio]: The Gate of the Eagle in the smallest palace, The Gate of the Canestalk and the Gate of the Snake of Mirrors. And when they had closed them, no one could get out anywhere.

Once they had done this, they entered the Sacred Patio to kill people. They came on foot, carrying swords and wooden and metal shields. Immediately, they surrounded those who danced, then rushed to the place where the drums were played. They attacked the man who was drumming and cut off both his arms. Then they cut off his head [with such a force] that it flew off, falling far away.

At that moment, they then attacked all the people, stabbing them, spearing them, wounding them with their swords. They struck some from behind, who fell instantly to the ground with their entrails hanging out [of their bodies]. They cut off the heads of some and smashed the heads of others into little pieces.

They struck others in the shoulders and tore their arms from their bodies. They struck some in the thighs and some in the calves. They slashed others in the abdomen and their entrails fell to the earth. There were some who even ran in vain, but their bowels spilled as they ran; they seemed to get their feet entangled with their own entrails. Eager to flee, they found nowhere to go.

Some tried to escape, but the Spaniards murdered them at the gates while they laughed. Others climbed the walls, but they could not save themselves. Others entered the communal house, where they were safe for a while. Others lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead. But if they stood up again they [the Spaniards] would see them and kill them.

The blood of the warriors ran like water as they ran, forming pools, which widened, as the smell of blood and entrails fouled the air.

And the Spaniards walked everywhere, searching the communal houses to kill those who were hiding. They ran everywhere, they searched every place.

When [people] outside [the Sacred Patio learned of the massacre], shouting began, *"Captains, Mexicas, come here quickly! Come here with all arms, spears, and shields! Our captains have been murdered! Our warriors have been slain! Oh Méxicas captains, [our warriors] have been annihilated!"*

Then a roar was heard, screams, people wailed, as they beat their palms against their lips. Quickly the captains assembled, as if planned in advance, and carried their spears and shields. Then the battle began. [The Méxicas] attacked them with arrows and even javelins, including small javelins used for hunting birds. They furiously hurled their javelins [at the Spaniards]. It was as if a layer of yellow canes spread over the Spaniards.

Source #8: López de Gómara on México Rebellion (1552)

Cortés wanted to entirely understand the cause of the Indians' rebellion. He interrogated them [the Spaniards] altogether. Some said it was caused by the message sent by Narváez, others because the people wanted to toss the Spaniards out of Mexico [Tenochtitlan], which had been planned as soon as the ships had arrived, because while they were fighting they shouted "Get out!" at them. Others said it was to liberate Moctezuma, for they fought saying, "*Free our god and King if you don't want to die!*" Still others said it was to steal the gold, silver, and jewels that the Spaniards had, because they heard the Indians say, "*Here you shall leave the gold that you have taken!*" Again, some said it was to keep the Tlaxcalans and other mortal enemies out of Mexico. Finally, many believed that taking their idols as gods, they had given themselves to the devil.

Any of these things would have been enough to cause the rebellion, not to mention all of them together. But the principal one was that a few days after Cortés left to confront Narváez, it became time for a festival the Méxicas wanted to celebrate in their traditional way. . . . They begged Pedro de Alvarado to give them his permission, so [the Spaniards] wouldn't think that they planned to kill them. Alvarado consented provided that there were no sacrifices, no people killed, and no one had weapons.

More than 600 gentlemen and several lords gathered in the yard of the largest temple; some said there were more than a thousand there. They made a lot of noise with their drums, shells, bugles, and *hendidors*, which sounded like a loud whistle. Preparing their festival, they were naked, but covered with precious stones, pearls, necklaces, belts, bracelets, many jewels of gold, silver, and mother-of-pearl, wearing very rich feathers on their heads. They performed a dance called the *mazeualiztli*, which is called that because it is a holiday from work [symbolized by the word for farmer, *macehaulli*]. . . . They laid mats in the patio of the temple and played drums on them. They danced in circles, holding hands, to the music of the singers, to which they responded.

The songs were sacred, and not profane, and were sung to praise the god honored in the festival, to induce him to provide water and grain, health, and victory, or to thank him for healthy children and other things. And those who knew the language and these ceremonial rites said that when the people danced in the temples, they perform very different than those who danced the *netoteliztli*, in voice, movement of the body, head, arms, and feet, by which they manifested their concepts of good and evil. The Spaniards called this dance, an *areito*, a word they brought from the islands of Cuba and Santo Domingo.

While the Méxicas gentlemen were dancing in the temple yard of Vitcilopuchtli [Huitzilopochtli], Pedro de Alvarado went there. Whether on [the basis of] his own opinion or in an agreement decided by everyone, I don't know, but some say he had been warned that the Indian nobles of the city had assembled to plot the mutiny and the rebellion, which they later carried out; others, believe that [the Spaniards] went to watch them perform this famous and praised dance, and seeing how rich they were and wanting the gold the Indians were wearing, he [Alvarado] covered each of the entrances with ten or twelve Spaniards and went inside with more than fifty [Spaniards], and without remorse and lacking any Christian piety, they brutally stabbed and killed the Indians, and took what they were wearing.

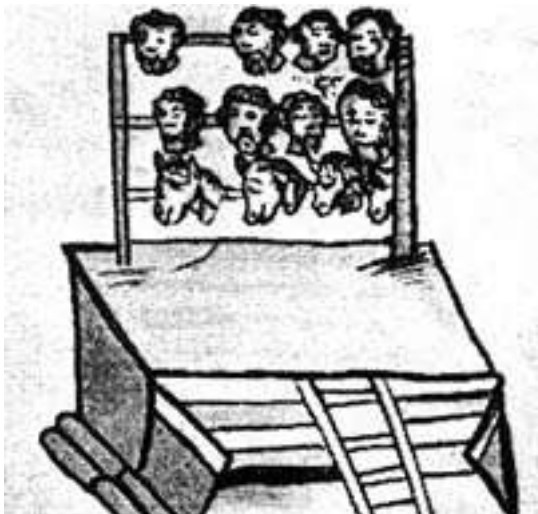
Source #9: Diego Durán: CAP 12



Diego Durán,
*Historia general de las
Indias de Nueva España y
islas de Tierra Firme.*

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Durán, born in Mexico to an Aztec mother and a Spanish father, became a Franciscan and set out to measure the possibilities and limits of Spanish missionization. His fragmentary history is divided into three sections: a history of Mexico before the Spanish invasion; native religion; and native calendars and festivals. Durán relied on native informants, probably from the Nahuatl elite, as he constructed his account. The colored lithographic plates which accompany this 19th century printed edition of the **16th century manuscript** are based on Nahuatl drawings. While it deals primarily with pre-conquest history, Durán's text also contains important details about the early post-conquest period, based on native materials which may now be lost.



Source #10: Image: “Spaniards and Horses on
Skull Rack,” *The Florentine Codex* (1590)

Source #11: Mexica Capture and Sacrifice Spaniards and Their Horses

From Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex*, Book 12, Chapter Thirty-five (1590)

Here it is told how once again the Mexicas took captives--according to the count of the Spaniards, there were fifty-three, as well as many Tlaxcalans and people of Tetzaco, Chalco, and Xochimilco--and how they sacrificed them before their former gods.

At this point [after a long siege of Tenochtitán], the Mexica warriors threw themselves [into the open] and chased [the Spaniards]; they ambushed them from the passageways, and when the Spaniards saw it [they believed that the Mexicas] seemed drunk. [The Mexicas] then took captives. Many Tlaxcalans, and people of Acolhuacan, Chalco, Xochimilco, etc., were taken. A great many were captured and killed. They forced the Spaniards and all the others to go right into the water.

And the road became very slippery; one could no longer walk on it, but would slip and slide. And the captives were dragged along the trails.

Then they took the captives to Yacacolco, hurrying them along, keeping them together. Some went weeping, some went singing, some went shouting while clapping their hands against their mouths. When they got them to Yacacolco, they lined them up in rows, in files. One by one they proceeded to the small pyramid where they were slain. The Spaniards went first, going in the lead; the people of all the different [allied] cities just followed. And when the sacrifice was over, they chopped off the heads of the Spaniards. They strung the Spaniards heads on poles [on the skull rack]; they also strung up the heads of the horses, arranging them below, while the heads of the Spaniards were above. They placed them so they faced east toward the rising sun. But they did not string up the heads of all of those from the allied towns, nor did they string up the heads from those who had come from far away. There were fifty-three Spaniards they captured and four horses.

Source #12: Mexicas Sacrifice Spaniards

From Cortés, *Third Letter* (1522), pp. 298-299

In this defeat thirty-five or forty Spaniards, and more than a thousand of our Indian allies, were slain by the enemy, besides more than twenty Christians wounded, among whom was myself in the leg. We lost the small field-piece that we had taken with us, and many crossbows, muskets, and other arms. Immediately after their victory, in order to strike terror into the alguazil mayor and Pedro de Alvarado, the enemy carried all the Spaniards both living and dead, whom they had taken to the Tlatelulco, which is the market-place, and in the lofty towers that are situated there they sacrificed them naked, opening their breasts and taking out their hearts to offer them to the idols. This was seen by the Spaniards of Alvarado's division from where they were fighting, and from the whiteness of the naked bodies, which they saw sacrificed they knew them to be Christians...

That day and the following night, the enemy made great rejoicings with horns and kettle-drums, appearing to be overwhelmed with joy; and they opened all the streets and bridges as they were before, and in setting their fires and sentries at night, they came within two bow-shots of our camp; but as we had returned discomfited, wounded, and destitute of arms, there was need of rest and recruiting. In the mean time, the rulers of the city took occasion to send messengers to their subjects in many provinces, to say that they had gained a signal victory and destroyed many Christians, and that soon they would put an end to us; and the messengers carried with them as credentials two heads of horses which they displayed for the purpose of showing wherever it seemed advisable that there was more reason for the rebellions to persevere than before.

Source # 13: Bernal del Castillo (1568)

Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the last survivor of the Conquest of Mexico, died on his estate in Guatemala at the age of eighty-nine. He was over seventy when he began *The Conquest of New Spain*, written in part to counter errors of other historians. His first-person account is a soldier's vivid recollection, the "story of myself and my comrades, all true conquerors, who served His Majesty in the discovery, conquest, pacification, and settlement of the provinces of New Spain." In his account of the battle for Tenochtitlan, or Mexico City, the conquistador comes off as a far more vulnerable human being than is usually depicted.

A Terrifying Sound

When we had retired almost to our quarters, across a great opening full of water, their arrows, darts, and stones could no longer reach us. Sandoval, Francisco de Lugo, and Andres de Tapia were standing with Pedro de Alvarado, each one telling his story and discussing Cortes' orders, when the dismal drum of Huichilobos sounded again, accompanied by conches, horns, and trumpet-like instruments. It was a terrifying sound, and when we looked at the tall *cue* from which it came we saw our comrades who had been captured in Cortes' defeat being dragged up the steps to be sacrificed. When they had hauled them up to a small platform in front of the shrine where they kept their accursed idols we saw them put plumes on the heads of many of them; and then they made them dance with a sort of fan in front of Huichilobos. Then after they had danced the papas laid them down on their backs on some narrow stones of sacrifice and, cutting open their chests, drew out their palpitating hearts which they offered to the idols before them. Then they kicked the bodies down the steps, and the Indian butchers who were waiting below cut off their arms and legs and flayed their faces, which they afterwards prepared like glove leather, with their beards on, and kept for their drunken festivals. Then they ate their flesh with a sauce of peppers and tomatoes. They sacrificed all our men in this way, eating their legs and arms, offering their hearts and blood to their idols as I have said, and throwing their trunks and entrails to lions and tigers and serpents and snakes that they kept in the wild-beast houses I have described in an earlier chapter.

On seeing these atrocities, all of us in our camp said to one another: 'Thank God they did not carry me off to be sacrificed!' My readers must remember that though we were not far off we could do nothing to help, and could only pray God to guard us from such a death. Then at the very moment of the sacrifice, great bands of Mexicans suddenly fell upon us and kept us busy on all sides. We could find no way of holding them. 'Look!' they shouted, 'that is the way you will all die, as our gods have many times promised us,' and the threats they shouted at our Tlascalcan allies were so cruel and so frightening that they lost their spirit. The Mexicans threw them roasted legs of Indians and the arms of our soldiers with cries of: 'Eat the flesh of these *Teules* and of your brothers, for we are glutted with it. You can stuff yourselves on our leavings. Now see these houses you have pulled down. We shall make you build them again, much finer, with white stone and fine masonry. So go on helping the *Teules*. You will see them all sacrificed.'

Guatemoc did something more after his victory. He sent the hands and feet of our soldiers, and the skin of their faces, and the heads of the horses that had been killed, to all the towns of our allies and friends and their relations, with the message that as more than half of us were dead and he would soon finish off the rest, they had better break their alliance with us and come to Mexico, because if they did not desert us quickly he would come and destroy them.

Source #14: Diego Durán, CAP 23



Diego Durán,
*Historia general de las
Indias de Nueva España y
islas de Tierra Firme.*

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Durán, born in Mexico to an Aztec mother and a Spanish father, became a Franciscan and set out to measure the possibilities and limits of Spanish missionization. His fragmentary history is divided into three sections: a history of Mexico before the Spanish invasion; native religion; and native calendars and festivals. Durán relied on native informants, probably from the Nahua elite, as he constructed his account. The colored lithographic plates which accompany this 19th century printed edition of the **16th century manuscript** are based on Nahuatl drawings. While it deals primarily with pre-conquest history, Durán's text also contains important details about the early post-conquest period, based on native materials which may now be lost.

The Power of the Past and the Fear of the Foreign

Few generalizations about Mexicans by nationals or foreigners are as widespread as those underlining the country's obsession with its history and the resulting fear and rejection of "the other." In the following two chapters we will contrast a corresponding trait of character and the material reality it affects and contradicts.

Octavio Paz, in an essay in *The New Yorker* in 1979 examining the differences between Mexico and the United States, emphasized how they were also separated by their different views of the past: Mexico looks back and broods; the United States looks forward and forgets.¹ The notion that the outside world has always been a source of danger and disgrace for Mexicans, that everything coming from abroad threatens the country, is of course hardly irrational. It is well founded in Mexican history. But the country's obsession with the past also springs from how it is read: as a past of oppression and betrayal. Mexico's official history, in almost every reading, is composed of successive episodes of invasion, rape, conquest, treason, and death, all linked somehow to an "other," who is always alien, extraneous, foreign.

We have already stressed how contradictory this notion can be. As the Mexican writer and commentator Luis González de Alba has repeatedly claimed, if today's "us" identifies Mexicans with the conquered Indians of 1519-21, then how come we are all *mestizos*, by definition offspring of Indians and Spaniards?² How did we manage to descend only from Indians? But behind this oft-denounced paradox, there is both an interesting factual question and an accompanying psychosocial analysis that, while arguably simplistic, does provide some clues to Mexicans' fear of the foreign and their entrapment in the past.

There is a logic to their seeing themselves as more Indian than Spanish, or mono-ethnic *mestizos* rather than products of multiethnic *mestizaje*. In the overwhelming majority of cases during the early years of the Conquest and the colony, *mestizos* were born to Indian mothers and Spanish fathers, hardly ever the other way around. And it is also a fact that the Spanish father was invariably an absent one, to put it mildly. He was literally just passing through, satiating his sexual hunger, and moving on. As Federico San Román has phrased it, embroidering on Santiago Ramírez's thesis, this absence of any father explains both Mexican individualism and conflict aversion. Both were defense mechanisms constructed to guard the abandoned Mexican

from a hostile world, where the protective father did not exist.³ The Spanish procreated with many women without filling the role of fathers or husbands. The first *mestizos* grew up without a father and without an integrated family. The Mexican, then, says San Román, is a chronically unfathered or fatherless being, whose initial bastardy leaves a permanent mark, and who repeats his own history until today. His eyes are always focused on the past, on the same drama, on the same betrayal. That recurrent betrayal, from generation to generation, feeds the historical anger that has much more to do with family disintegration and poverty today than with events of five centuries ago.

(Re) Writing History

Be this as it may, there is scant room for discussion about the way "Mexican" history began: how and why Cortés conquered the Aztec empire with four hundred men and twelve or thirteen horses. The answer is . . . he didn't. The Aztecs' colonized, oppressed neighbors did, together with a smallpox epidemic that came from Cuba in the summer of 1520, the Aztecs' insistence on taking captives alive for human sacrifice, and their cosmology warning of an imminent debacle.⁴ All Cortés accomplished—in one of the most astounding political feats of all time—was to channel widespread discontent, nourished by human sacrifice, cannibalism, blood tributes against the empire, and the world vision of the Aztecs into a funnel of weakness, betrayal, and corruption. But this accurate, close-to-the-ground version of history serves neither as a cornerstone for nation building nor as the raw material of myths and legend.

For that, it had to be the other way around. Thus, our Indian ancestors were defeated by a powerful enemy that took advantage of its technological prowess and the divisions of the "home team" to subdue the country. And so, for the first time, the external "other" wrought its plague and pestilence upon the people of Mexico, not in actual fact, but in the written and oral history of a culture obsessed by history and at the same time familiar with historical underpinnings and how to manipulate them. As Emilio Uranga has put it: "The Mexican always gives the impression of already having lived before, of dragging in the depths of his soul a history and a world that are no longer, but that emotionally, at least, were inerascably engraved in his soul."⁵ For him (or her), history is a stone slab borne on the back of a vanquished people.

The Conquest and Colonialism

Any contact with the Mexican people, however brief, reveals that the ancient beliefs and customs are still in existence beneath Western forms. These still-living remains testify to the vitality of the pre-Cortesian cultures. And after the discoveries of archaeologists and historians it is no longer possible to refer to those societies as savage or primitive tribes. Over and above the fascination or horror they inspire in us, we must admit that when the Spaniards arrived in Mexico they found complete and refined civilizations.

Mesoamerica — that is, the nucleus of what was later to be New Spain — was a territory that included the central and southern parts of present-day Mexico and a portion of Central America. To the north, the Chichimecas wandered among the deserts and uncultivated plains. (Chichimeca is a generic term, without national distinctions, that was applied to the barbarians by the inhabitants of the Central Plateau.) The frontiers between were unstable, like those of ancient Rome, and the last centuries of Mesoamerican history can be summed up as the history of repeated encounters between waves of northern hunters — almost all of them belonging to the Náhuatl family — and the settled populations. The Aztecs were the last to enter the Valley of Mexico. The previous work of erosion by their predecessors, and the wasting away of the intimate springs of the ancient local cultures, made it possible for them to accomplish the extraordinary task of founding what Arnold Toynbee calls a Universal Empire, based on the remains of older societies.

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According to Toynbee, the Spaniards did nothing except act as substitutes, resolving through political synthesis the tendency toward dispersal that threatened the Mesoamerican world.

When we consider what Mexico was like at the arrival of Cortés, we are surprised at the large number of cities and cultures, in contrast to the relative homogeneity of their most characteristic traits. The diversity of the indigenous nuclei and the rivalries that lacerated them indicate that Mesoamerica was made up of a complex of autonomous peoples, nations and cultures, each with its own traditions, exactly as in the Mediterranean and other cultural areas. Mesoamerica was a historical world in itself.

In addition, the cultural homogeneity of these centers shows that the primitive individuality of each culture had been replaced, perhaps within a fairly recent period, by uniform religious and political structures. The mother cultures in the central and southern areas had in fact been extinguished several centuries before. Their successors had combined and re-created all that variety of local expression, and the work of synthesis had culminated in the erection of a model which, with slight differences, was the same for all.

Mesoamerica has been described very generally as a uniform historical area characterized by the constant presence of certain elements common to all its cultures: an agriculture based on maize, a ritual calendar, a ritual ball-game, human sacrifices, solar and vegetation myths, etc. It is said that all of these elements originated in the south and were assimilated at various times by the immigrants from the north. If this were true, Mesoamerican culture would be the result of various southern creations that were adopted, developed and systematized by nomadic groups. But this scheme neglects the originality of each local culture. The resemblances among the religious, political and mythical conceptions of the Indo-European peoples, for instance, do not deny the originality of each one of them. But, apart from the particular originality of each culture, it is evident that all of them, because of decadence or debilitation, were on the point of being absorbed into the Aztec Empire, which was heir to the civilizations of the Central Plateau.

The conquest of Mexico would be inexplicable without these antecedents. The arrival of the Spaniards seemed a liberation to the people under Aztec rule. The various city-states allied themselves with the conquistadors or watched with indifference — if not with pleasure — the fall of each of their rivals, especially that of the most powerful, Tenochtitlán. But the political genius of Cortés, the superior techniques of the Spaniards (lacking in such decisive actions as the battle of Otumba), and the defection of vassals and allies, could not have brought about the ruin of the Aztec Empire if it had not suddenly felt a sense of weakness, an intimate doubt that caused it to vacillate and surrender. When Moctezuma opened the gates of Tenochtitlán to the Spaniards and welcomed Cortés with gifts, the Aztecs lost the encounter. Their final struggle was a form of suicide, as we can gather from all the existing accounts of that grandiose and astounding event.

Why did Moctezuma give up? Why was he so fascinated by the Spaniards that he experienced a vertigo which it is no exaggeration to call sacred — the lucid vertigo of the suicide on the brink of the abyss? The gods had abandoned him. The great betrayal with which the history of Mexico begins was not committed by the Tlaxcaltecas or by Moctezuma and his group: it was committed by the gods. No other people have ever felt so completely helpless as the Aztec nation felt at the appearance of the omens, prophecies and warnings that announced its fall. We are unlikely to understand the meaning of these signs and predictions for the Indians if we forget their cyclical conception of time. As with many other peoples and civilizations, time was not an empty, abstract measurement to the Aztecs, but rather **something concrete, a force or substance or fluid** perpetually being used up. Hence the necessity of rites and sacrifices to reinvigorate the year or the century. But time — or, more precisely, each period of time — was not only something living that was born, grew up, decayed and was reborn. It was also a succession that returned: one period of time ended and another came back. The arrival of the Spaniards was interpreted by Moctezuma, at least at the beginning, not so much as a threat from outside than as the internal conclusion of one cosmic period and the commencement of another. The gods departed because their period of time was at an end, but another period returned and with it, other gods and another era.

The character of the Conquest is equally complex from the point of view expressed in the various accounts by the Spaniards. Everything is contradictory. Like the reconquest of Spain, it was both a private undertaking and a national accomplishment. Cortés and the Cid fought on their own responsibility and against the will of their superiors, but in the name of — and on behalf of — the king. They were vassals, rebels and crusaders. Opposing concepts fought within their own minds and those of their soldiers: the interests of the Monarchy and of individuals, the interests of the Faith and of personal greed for gold. Each conquistador and missionary and bureaucrat was a field of battle. Considered separately, each one represented the great powers that struggled for the control of society — feudalism, the Church and absolute Monarchy — but other tendencies struggled within them. These were the same tendencies that distinguished Spain from the rest of Europe and made her, in the literal sense of the word, an eccentric nation.

Spain was the defender of the Faith and her soldiers were soldiers of Christ. This circumstance did not prevent the Emperor and his successors from carrying on such heated disputes with the Papacy that the Council of Trent could not completely settle them. Spain was still a medieval nation, and many of the institutions she brought to the New World, like many of the men who established them, were also medieval. At the same time, the discovery and conquest of America was a Renaissance undertaking. Therefore Spain also participated in the Renaissance, although it is sometimes thought that her overseas conquests — the result of Renaissance science and technology, even Renaissance dreams and utopias — did not form a part of that historical movement.

On the other hand, the conquistadors were not merely repetitions of the medieval warriors who fought the Moors and infidels. They were adventurers, that is, men who opened up new lands and risked the unknown. This was another Renaissance characteristic. The medieval knight, on the contrary, lived in a closed world. His great undertaking was the Crusades, a historical episode very different from the conquest of America. The former was a winning back; the latter, a discovery and a founding. Also, many of the conquistadors — Cortés, for example, or Jiménez de Quesada — are unimaginable in the Middle Ages. Their literary tastes as well as their political realism, their awareness of the work they were doing as well as what Ortega y Gasset would call their "style of life," have small resemblance to the medieval sensibility.